

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith (1943)

Questions provided by Reading Group Guide.

1. In a particularly revealing chapter of **A Tree Grows in Brooklyn**, Francie's teacher dismisses her essays about everyday life among the poor as "sordid," and, indeed, many of the novel's characters seem to harbor a sense of shame about their poverty. But they also display a remarkable self-reliance (Katie, for example, says she would kill herself and her children before accepting charity). How and why have our society's perceptions of poverty changed - for better or worse - during the last one hundred years?
2. Some critics have argued that many of the characters in **A Tree Grows in Brooklyn** can be dismissed as stereotypes, exhibiting quaint characteristics or representing pat qualities of either nobility or degeneracy. Is this a fair criticism? Which characters are the most convincing? The least?
3. Francie observes more than once that women seem to hate other women ("they stuck together for only one thing: to trample on some other woman"), while men, even if they hate each other, stick together against the world. Is this an accurate appraisal of the way things are in the novel?
4. The women in the Nolan/Rommely clan exhibit most of the strength and, whenever humanly possible, control the family's destiny. In what ways does Francie continue this legacy?
5. What might Francie's obsession with order - from systematically reading the books in the library from A through Z, to trying every flavor ice cream soda - in turn say about her circumstances and her dreams?
6. Although it is written in the third person, there can be little argument that the narrative is largely from Francie's point of view. How would the book differ if it was told from Neeley's perspective?
7. How can modern readers reconcile the frequent anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant sentiments that characters espouse throughout the novel?
8. Could it be argued that the main character of the book is not Francie but, in fact, Brooklyn itself?